

Ecclesiastes 3-6 • Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

We continue our study in King Solomon's chronicle of his quest to discover the meaning of life.

In Ch. 2, he said that God's not letting us in on all He's doing and there are times when it seems that life is pointless.

And if that's all the farther you go in your thinking, then you'll be seriously bummed out and miss the opportunities life has to experience genuine joy & pleasure.

We could summarize what he says this way – We're born & we die. Don't miss out on the life that comes in between.

That life flows through different seasons or phases.

And each one of them has important lessons for us to learn.

They are all a part of God's great plan.

Again, that plan is beyond the scope of our figuring out.

But we must be sure not to miss out on learning it.

Ecclesiastes 3

1 To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven:

2 A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted;

3 A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up;

4 A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance;

5 A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing;

6 A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away;

7 A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak;

8 A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace.

Since we covered these verses in depth Sunday, will pass over them tonight.

⁹ What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? ¹⁰ I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.

Solomon voices an intuition common to all people – that while birth, life & death are common to all people, something deep inside says that there is more to us than just biological machines who fiddle around for 80 years then die & decay into dust.

We sense we're destined for eternity & that this life is just the first phase of it.

And while God has placed this universal intuition in us, He's not spelling out the whole thing for us.

Why? Because He wants us to seek Him.

That's the whole purpose & goal of this first phase of our eternity – to seek God.

¹² I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, ¹³ and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God.

It's God intention that we enjoy the good things that this life can bring.

What Solomon says here is a powerful premise upon which to construct a system a political-economic system.

But that's a subject for another time.

¹⁴ I know that whatever God does, It shall be forever. Nothing can be added to it, And nothing taken from it. God does it, that men should fear before Him.

¹⁵ That which is has already been, And what is to be has already been; And God requires an account of what is

past.

This is a repeat of what he said earlier; there's nothing truly new under the sun.

All that's new is the ways we go about the old things.

¹⁶ Moreover I saw under the sun:

Remember that this is a reference to life lived solely in this material plane w/o reference to God.

Solomon witnessed something in this godless realm that was troubling –

In the place of judgment, Wickedness was there; And in the place of righteousness, Iniquity was there.

¹⁷ I said in my heart, “God shall judge the righteous and the wicked, For there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.”

He gives voice to another common intuition people have – the sense of injustice that comes from seeing how things so often go.

The wicked prosper & aren't held accountable for their evil.

We see that & say, “That's not right!”

How could we say that unless there was a universal sense of right & wrong that doesn't come from “under the sun” but must come from **over** it?

And if there is a righteous God, then He will exact the judgment that was failed to be done under the sun.

Vs. 18-22 have to be taken as a whole and are a challenge to interpret.

¹⁸ I said in my heart, “Concerning the condition of the sons of men, God tests them, that they may see that they themselves are like animals.” ¹⁹ For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. ²¹ Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth? ²² So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

In essence Solomon is saying that God wants people to realize the inevitability of death and so make good advantage of life.

Instead of living as though they are immortal, they ought to live faithfully with what's before them and with the realization they will eventually stand before God for judgment.

This is something he repeats in chs. 9 & 11.

Ecclesiastes 4

1 Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: And look! The tears of the oppressed, But they have no comforter— On the side of their oppressors there is power, But they have no comforter.

Once again Solomon struggles with the evidences of injustice he sees.

He realizes if life under the sun was all there was, if there was no Righteous God in heaven Who will ultimately set all things straight, then it would be better to be ignorant of such troubling things.

² Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, More than the living who are still alive.

³ Yet, better than both is he who has never existed, Who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

If these verses trouble you for the pessimism they seem to convey, consider this Have you ever known someone who was suffering so badly that you thought it would be better for them to die?

That's the basic idea here.

⁴ Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

There are many profound insights in Ecclesiastes & this is one of them.

It's Solomon's recognition that most achievement comes through a desire to be superior.

The psychologist Alfred Adler stumbled on this and developed his theory of the **inferiority complex** from it.

He said it was the sense of being inferior to another that drove a good part of human behavior as people struggled to rise above those around them.

God **did** create men & women to be productive.

One of the most important drives human possess is the desire to accomplish something.

But when sin & selfishness hijack that God given desire it becomes **an attitude of envy & competition** that can destroy not only individual lives but entire nations.

One more God-given drive is turned into a frustration when it is lived purely "under the sun."

⁵ The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. ⁶ Better a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind.

The fool is the one who reacts to the vanity of competitive greed by giving up & doing nothing.

That's not the proper response.

What is, is to find contentment in the work God has called us to and not allow that to be altered or edited by comparing ourselves to others; either their accomplishments or lack of them.

⁷ Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, Nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.

Solomon refers to the guy who's at the top of the game.

There's no one to envy because he's top-dog. He ends up competing with himself.

Which is a game he'll never win.

Some would say **Mark Zuckerberg**, founder & head of Facebook is the kind of guy Solomon describes here; fabulously rich, but utterly empty!

⁹ Two are better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labor. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up. ¹¹ Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone? ¹² Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Solomon brings wise counsel to this issue of the drive to accomplish, to work & be productive.

A mature approach is to realize that instead of being envious & competitive with one another, always trying to be superior to everyone else, we pool the drive to accomplish with others.

Instead of it being something that divides us & sets us at odds with one another, it can be something that brings us together.

Because 2, working together can produce much more than just the sum of their individual production.

Add a 3rd partner to that mix & the work can increase exponentially.

This is a wonderful passage for a believing couple.

In Genesis we read that Eve was created as the companion & partner with Adam.

In the original creation, they were designed to be a team that worked together.

And before the Fall, God met & walked with them in their Garden home.

He was the 3rd Person who completed them and bound them together.

This is the way it ought to be in a Christian marriage.

The husband & wife are equal partners, each with different roles but as they work together, they're able to accomplish so much more than just the sum of their individual parts.

And with the HS weaving them together & empowering them as the unseen 3rd person, it lifts their lives & work to a whole new level.

¹³ Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more. ¹⁴ For he comes out of prison to be king, Although he was born poor in his kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who walk under the sun; They were with the second youth who stands in his place. ¹⁶ There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king; Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind. Fear God, Keep Your Vows

This is another set of verses that are difficult to interpret.

It's another illustration of the **futility of ambition** that's been the theme of most of this chapter.

A young man rises out of the obscurity of poverty & prison to power through great ambition.

Once he has power, he assumes he's smarter than everyone else and won't listen to wise counsel.

He becomes just like the fool before him he replaced.

And sure enough, eventually another young man rises to take his place.

He's Mr. Hot Stuff in his generation. He's on the cover of **Time, Newsweek, Forbes, GQ & Business Weekly**.

Then he's replaced by the next guy, who bumps him from the best-seller lists.

Solomon speaks of a king here, but this applies equally to anyone who's top of their field.

And the point is the same as he's made already – If you take your God given drive to accomplish & live it merely under the sun, w/o reference to God and what He requires, then it all turns out to be pointless because whatever you manage to accomplish ends with you when you either lose your position or you die.

Ecclesiastes 5

¹ Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil.

² Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God.

For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few. ³ For a dream comes through much activity, And a fool's voice is known by his many words.

⁴ When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; For He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed— ⁵ Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. ⁶ Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin, nor say before the messenger of God that it was an error. Why should God be angry at your excuse and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷ For in the multitude of dreams and many words there is also vanity. But fear God.

This was our text 2 Sundays ago so we'll leave it to you to get the CD if you weren't here.

⁸ If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perversion of justice and righteousness in a province, do not marvel at the matter; for high official watches over high official, and higher officials are over them. ⁹ Moreover the profit of the land is for all; even the king is served from the field.

A farmer works his fields and produces a harvest.

Along comes the local tax-man, working on behalf of the local chief, demanding 15%.

That chief is then approached by a provincial administrator working for the governor who requires his 15% of all the chief takes in from all his farmers.

Then a royal official working for the king arrives at the governor's headquarters asking for 15% of all the chiefs he's collected from.

Then the king decides to embark on a massive public works project with lots of monuments top what a great king he is. So he tells his officials to raise the take to 20%.

When the official goes to the governors he tells them the king has raised the tax to 23%; they're going to

keep 3% for themselves.

The governors know what's going on & decided instead of ratting out the royal officials they're pass along the increase to their chiefs.

So their administrators ask the chiefs for 25% & the chiefs pass long the favor to the farmers by charging 30%.

If the farmer balks at this doubling of his taxes, the chief uses might to enforce his will.

Solomon is not justifying this misuse of power. On the contrary.

What he's saying is that the quality of the man at the top and how well he exercises his role as ruler will determine the conduct of those under his authority.

A just king will employ just under-authorities.

A corrupt king's corruption will spread downward and bring great distress to those who are at the lowest economic & political rungs of society.

¹⁰ He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity. ¹¹ When goods increase, They increase who eat them; So what profit have the owners except to see them with their eyes?

He returns to something we saw last week - that there's no real or lasting satisfaction to be found in material possessions or wealth.

They are fun for a moment but the moment doesn't last.

The eye & ear are never filled; they always want more.

¹² The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eats little or much; But the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.

The laboring man here is the guy who has a mature & balanced view of life.

He works to provide for his needs but doesn't find his significance in his work or what his work produces.

Life for him isn't about possessions or account balances.

When he lies down at night after an honest days' toil, he sleeps soundly because he's not basing his meaning in earthly things.

Those who do, who make life about wealth, possessions & power can only sleep in fits & starts because they are forever worried about their loss.

Have you seen the commercial of the dog who worries endlessly about his bone? Dish, hole, safe deposit box – nightmares. So – solution, he **insures** it.

¹³ There is a severe evil which I have seen under the sun: Riches kept for their owner to his hurt. ¹⁴ But those riches perish through misfortune; When he begets a son, there is nothing in his hand. ¹⁵ As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return, to go as he came; And he shall take nothing from his labor which he may carry away in his hand. ¹⁶ And this also is a severe evil— Just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit has he who has labored for the wind? ¹⁷ All his days he also eats in darkness, and he has much sorrow and sickness and anger.

A man works hard to amass a fortune. He even sacrifices time with his family, specifically, his son – so that he can maximize his earnings.

He justifies the neglect of his son by with the thought that when he dies, his fortune will pass to the young man.

But catastrophe strikes and he's wiped out.

Not only has he wasted the years he could have spent in a relationship with his boy, he has nothing to leave him except the shame of failure.

It's not wrong to work hard & seek to provide well for yourself & your family.

But everything must be done in moderation; keeping the proper balance in life.

Never forsake the God-ordained relationship you have.

¹⁸ Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. ¹⁹ As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God. ²⁰ For he will not dwell unduly on the days of his life, because God keeps him busy with the joy of his heart.

While Solomon has spent a couple chapters now on urging the caution of vain ambition, he wants to make sure to affirm the rightness of hard work and enjoying the fruit of your labor.

Work! Work hard. Then take time to enjoy what your work produces.

Ecclesiastes 6

Though we have a ch. break here, there's not break in the content. Ch. 6 carries on with the same idea.

¹ There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: ² A man to whom God has given riches & wealth & honor, so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires; yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This is vanity, and it is an evil affliction.

The evil Solomon saw wasn't that the man who had been allowed to accumulate vast wealth had it taken from him before he could enjoy it.

The evil lay in the fact that the man failed to honor the God who gave him his fortune.

Instead of being humbled by his success & thanking God, he became so arrogant it demanded God's judgment.

³ If a man begets a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with goodness, or indeed he has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better than he— ⁴ for it comes in vanity and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness. ⁵ Though it has not seen the sun or known anything, this has more rest than that man, ⁶ even if he lives a thousand years twice—but has not seen goodness. Do not all go to one place?

Many children & long life were thought to be signs of God's favor.

But Sol says it's possible to be blessed abundantly by God & still fail to be satisfied if you only live under the sun.

Taking vs. 1-6 together – the man who has great wealth, lots of kids, & a super long life; all things that were supposed to be signs of God's blessing, can still fail to find satisfaction if his focus in life is in the wrong place.

Wealth won't do it. Kids won't do it. Long life won't do it.

In fact, without the right perspective, all 3 of these can end up being a huge burden!

Solomon puts it this way The whole world of those who live under the sun think it's all about money, power, pleasure.

So, you have that, & enjoy a huge family you can pass it all on to and be remembered for a long time, then you yourself live so long it's like you won't die.

All your life as you acquired the wealth & goodies you assumed it was acquiring them that would make you happy.

Once you get them you realize they don't. So you engage in all kinds of under the sun activities trying to find something to scratch the itch of significance.

And all that happens is that each year that passes of your 2000 year long life is more frustration.

It would have been better if you'd been still born.

At least the child that dies before it's born will never have to know the painful frustration you've known.

This is one of those sections of Eccl. that's a serious **bummer**.

⁷ All the labor of man is for his mouth [food], and yet the soul is not satisfied.

There it is –this world can't provide what the soul needs.

Though Solomon speaks specifically of food here, he means everything one's toil produces; creature comforts.

The soul's itch isn't scratched by the body's pleasures.

Significance isn't something the body is able to attain.

It's a spiritual quest & that's why living merely under the sun isn't enough.

⁸ For what more has the wise man than the fool?

Under the sun

What does the poor man have, Who knows how to walk before the living?

If all he does is live on this material earth w/o considering God.

⁹ Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of desire. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

Get this – Don't miss it! Solomon has already made it abundantly clear that there's no satisfaction for the soul under the sun.

There's no end to desire for those under the sun because they're looking in the wrong place.

And the frustration of dissatisfaction is a pain we run from by immersing ourselves in the pursuit of **more** desire.

One of the ways he's spoken of this is that the eye & ear are never filled; they never say "Enough."

I went to a quite a few rock concerts when I was younger.

As much as I enjoyed the music of some of classic rocks super-groups, by the end of nearly every concert, I was ready to go home – and usually drove home with the radio off!

I said, "That's enough," but it was always for a few hours.

The next morning on my way to work the radio was back on and the 8 tracks were blaring!

What Solomon says in vb. 9 is similar to his counsel about learning to enjoy the good things life brings.

Just because we'll not find genuine satisfaction under the sun, that shouldn't keep us from enjoying good food, good drink, good fun, good friends, good pleasures.

Just because the eye is never filled, that doesn't mean we can't take time to delight in the beauty our eye beholds.

That the ear won't ever be filled doesn't mean we can't fill it with that which is beautiful.

You see, Solomon is calling us to that balance again.

Life is for living and that living is meant by God to include some marvelous delights & pleasure.

Enjoy them, but don't think they will provide for you the meaning of life.

In fact – the only way to **truly enjoy** them is to realize they can't do anything more than provide a moment of pleasure and remind you of God's love & goodness.

[Story of couple seeking counsel. "He doesn't make me happy."]

¹⁰ Whatever one is, he has been named already, For it is known that he is man; And he cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he. [God] ¹¹ Since there are many things that increase vanity, How is man the better? ¹² For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?

In yet another passage difficult to interpret, Solomon returns to how he opened in 1:2-3 where he said –

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?

God in Heaven is sovereign and so far above man in wisdom & power that it's useless to contend with Him.

Yet man **does**.

Whether it's the contention of arguing with Him outright or of pretending He doesn't exist.

Either way, man seeks to pull God down to his level & make God cough up the answers that will bring the

satisfaction he's longing for.

The real problem is that man ***requires*** God, or life itself, to provide satisfaction ***on man's terms!***

In effect, Man usurps God's throne & turns the Creator into a lackey who exists to make sense of our lives ***as we want them to make sense.***

It's like we're still tasting the after effects of the forbidden fruit.

It was the Tree of what? The ***Knowledge*** of Good & Evil.

Having tasted of that tree we're now perpetually thirsting for ***more***, more ***knowledge.***

"God! Tell me what it's all about. I demand to know!"

God loves man, but He's not going to play that game with us.

It's not for us to know the ultimate purposes of God and He's not under any obligation to give us the details.

He's God, not we!

All we can do is know ***what*** He's chosen to reveal.

And everything He's chosen to reveal & make possible for us is realized in the Person of Jesus Christ.